

All I want for Christmas is to be free from despair - Unwrapping Hope

An Advent Sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton

Delivered on November 28, 2021

Part of the All I want for Christmas... unwrapping the gifts we really need this year.

Romans 8: 24-28, 31-38 NRSV

24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

Preamble -

Thank you for being with us today on this first Sunday of Advent. I'm Pastor Rob Hamilton and I am glad you've chosen to share your time and energy with me today. For the lifers gathered today, when I use the word 'advent' many of you know what that means; but there are some who advent is simply the term for counting down to Christmas by opening up a lego set or box of chocolates, so before I get into our topic today I want to do a little teaching on Advent.

Advent is the beginning of the church calendar. As it is the season that anticipates the coming of God in Jesus Christ. That's where the countdown to Christmas comes from, but advent is more than a countdown. **Advent is a season of waiting, defiance, and hope.** As Christians, we wait in the darkest days of the year for the light of Christ to come again. As Christians, we trust that even in our darkest days and nights God is with us. And so advent is the embodiment of the belief that in spite of all the brokenness, sin and sorrow of this world, God's kin-dom is breaking-in to bring redemption, reconciliation, justice, peace and salvation. That the light of God will overcome the darkness of the world.

It's no mistake that while we can't historically prove Jesus' birthday is December 25th, but that on the 25th roughly three days after the winter solstice that the naked eye can start to perceive that the daylight is increasing in our hemisphere. That through advent we have literally come through the shortest and darkest days of the year and on Christmas the light starts pushing the darkness back and claiming victory over the dark. So we celebrate Jesus the light of the world coming on the day we see the light starting to win. Advent is like knowing how the story ends, but you still have to go on the dark ride to get to the end.

I find that Advent is also a season of **defiance and protest**, because we believe in this God-shaped reality that God's light will prevail over darkness. As people of faith we stand in defiance with hope to all the powers and principalities that bring death, despair and darkness in the world. We know that despite what we wish we didn't see in Kenosha, Springfield, Washington, Bulgaria or Afghanistan God is with us and delivers us into a better reality here and now and in the life hereafter. So we light candles in protest of darkness. We sing songs of hope in the bleakest of times and we gather round each other to make sure we are not alone even though the God's final victory over sin and death hasn't come in full yet.

More can be said about advent, but I think that is a good start on this first of four Sundays of advent. Today, we recognize that which brings despair in life and how God gives us hope as a gift to free us from despair and Paul the author of Romans provides us with some important words about hope that we can dig into after we pause here for prayer. –

Prayer of Illumination

Jesus, Light of the World,

Come into the confines of our small dark world and shine our light. Dispel our shadow side with the light of your love. Speak to me and through me to bring us your message of hope for our lives in this season.

Amen.

Sermon

Hope might be one of the most powerfully foolish things we can do. Paul is so bold to say as much, we hope for things we do not see. We trust with no certainty that things will work out, no prescription or plan in place for our deliverance, a belief that there is a power stronger than our despair and then choosing to stand on that trust without any assurance or guarantee that trust or belief will be rewarded.

Hope isn't easy. I think that's why Paul is quick to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit will intercede on our behalf when we struggle to maintain hope as the world and our lives continue towards despair that God can take the mess we face or live in and reconcile it all into something beautiful or at least do something good with it.

Keisha Thomas knows how hard it is hope in the middle of the mess of life. Back in June of 1996, Keshia Thomas was 18 years old when the KKK held a rally in her home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Hundreds of protesters turned out to tell the white supremacist organization that they were not welcome in the progressive college town. At one point during the event, a man with a SS tattoo and wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with a Confederate flag ended up on the protesters' side of the fence and a small group began to chase him. **He was quickly knocked to the ground and kicked** and hit with placard sticks.

As people began to shout, "Kill the Nazi," Keisha, fearing that mob mentality had taken over, decided to act. **Keisha threw herself on top** of one of the men she had come to protest, protecting him from the blows, and told the crowd that you "can't beat goodness into a person." In discussing her motivation for this courageous act after the event, she stated, "**Someone had to step out of the pack and say, 'this isn't right'...** I knew what it was like to be hurt. The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me... violence is violence - nobody deserves to be hurt, especially not for an idea."

Thomas never heard from the man after that day but months later, a young man came up to her to say thanks, telling her that the man she had protected was his father. For Thomas, learning that he had a son brought even greater significance to her heroic act. As she observed, "For the most part, people who hurt... they come from hurt. It is a cycle. Let's say they had killed him or hurt him really bad. How does the son feel? Does he carry on the violence?"

Mark Brunner, the student photographer who took these now famous photographs, added that what was so remarkable was who Thomas saved: "She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her. Who does that in this world?"

In response to those who argued that the man deserved a beating or more, Pulitzer Prize-winning commentator Leonard Pitts Jr. offered this short reflection in The Miami Herald: "That some in Ann Arbor have been heard grumbling that {Keisha} should have left the man to his fate, only speaks of how far they have drifted from their own humanity. And of the crying need to get it back.

Keshia's choice was to affirm what they have lost.

Keshia's choice was human.

Keshia's choice was hope." -

There was no assurance that the mob wouldn't turn on Keisha. There was no assurance that the man she protected would have a change of heart. Keisha simply held out hope that in doing the right thing it would somehow dispel darkness and I think in that moment Keisha's hope did push back against the darkness and now 25 years later Keisha's story is still pushing back the darkness and despair even in us. That's the power of hope.

But despair is a powerful enemy to hope. **Despair is when one starts to lose or has lost hope that life and circumstances will get better.** Despair is like coming to the end of the road and not knowing where to go or what to do. We have plenty of that despair now, don't we? Coronavirus, racism, politics, missed holidays, economic struggles, broken relationships and the loss of those we love, you name it - are all fuel for despair to set in.

Christina Georgiana Rossetti the 19th century poet writes the hymn, In the Bleak Midwinter, from a place of despair and hope. Her father was ill and their family struggled economically for many years. At 14, Rossetti struggled with her mental health and had to leave school and by the age of 16 was regularly struggling with depression. Her circumstances and health led her to despair many times. But being a devout Anglican, Rossetti's faith was often a source of solace, strength and hope for her and her family.

We can hear despair in the first verse of this carol, when Rossetti creates a dreary and desolate image of the world into which the infant Jesus appeared by drawing on the experience of a British winter. She is not suggesting that it literally snowed in Bethlehem, but is drawing on a long-established literary idea of associating snow with Christ's birth.

*In the bleak midwinter,
Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone;*

Despair can feel like the harshness of winter, can't it? Cold. Dead. Bleak. Frozen. Lifeless. Threatening. Isolated and alone.

But of course we know this hymn doesn't linger in despair. It's like Rossetti knows from personal experience that the long winter of the soul doesn't last forever. She has hope. She knows how Jesus comes in our despair so that we may live in defiance to despair as those who live with hope. Remember, Paul says, **hope trusts that there is more than what we see**. Hope is that we are not alone in our dark moments because we know that God is with us. God knows our loneliness our pain our despair and comes to us anyway. But hope isn't wishful thinking or blissful ignorance. Hope doesn't down play circumstances. Hope defies our circumstances. Hope doesn't try to make us feel better with platitudes. Hope knows God's promises are true even if we have no clue how they will come true.

Rossetti unveils the source of hope that she knows, which is that Jesus is coming to upend our despair. In fact, heaven and angles cannot contain Jesus from coming to us in our darkness. But Jesus doesn't come as a superman in the Clark Kent disguise of a baby, instead Jesus comes as a vulnerable child, willing to suffer not only for us, but also with us, as one of us. Jesus comes in an act of full solidarity to take on despair and show us from the cross what it is to have hope; to trust that God can deliver us from despair, even God doesn't come sweeping in to take us from our desperate circumstances. God can redeem even death into life.

And so God can save a broken nation. God can redeem a virus-raged world. God can take life broken by cancer and still make something beautiful out of it. God can reconcile relationships and change our circumstances. The cross gives us hope that even if our deliverance isn't when we want it, it still can come in God's timing and in God's ways and as fleeting as that might be; it gives us hope.

It's that hope that compels us to offer God incarnate a gift, as we sing in defiance to despair in our last stanza of the hymn, but the only gift that seems fitting isn't gold, or myrrh, it isn't lamb for sacrifice. It isn't even a song. It is our hearts.

We can offer our hearts to Jesus as a gift for the one who is our hope. Hope that the bleakness of this cold, dark winter of the soul will be dispelled by the warmth and light of the love Christ child born anew in us.

May it be so for you and me this Advent season. Amen.